VISIT…

French Film Guide

LA GRANDE ILLUSION

Martin O'Shaughnessy

I.B.TAURIS

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(Jean Renoir, 1937)

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I.B. TAURIS
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1 Contexts

All films arise out of the complex coming together of broad socio-historical and narrower film-industrial contexts. They are also inevitably collective productions even if we sometimes talk about them as if only the director mattered. Because of this *La Grande Illusion* needs a multi-layered contextualisation. It can profitably be located in the career of its director in a way that will bring out its stylistic or thematic relationship with his other works. Yet, it must also be seen in terms of the interaction of director, performers and other creative personnel in a way inevitably conditioned by the particular mode of organisation of the French film industry in the 1930s. Finally, it needs to be seen as a product of its troubled period and as part of French society's evolving reflexion on the slaughter of the First World War even as fascism and another war threatened. If these different contextual layers cannot be collapsed into each other, nor can they can be kept neatly separate. Renoir's career, for example, was inevitably shaped by both the nature and practices of the French cinema industry and by broader socio-political factors while the war itself was not an impersonal contextual factor but something that had directly impacted on him and his family.

A director and his two careers

As is well known, Jean Renoir was the son of Auguste, the great painter. One might have expected him to have turned to painting or one of the other arts as a career. Instead, in February 1913, he enlisted in the First Regiment of Dragoons and had qualified as an officer by the time war started in August 1914. Although technically a horseman, he soon found himself in the trenches like other cavalrymen. In April 1915 he received a leg wound that turned gangrenous. Saved by a skilled doctor, he would nonetheless limp for the rest of his life. His mother Aline, a sick woman, rushed to his bedside, stayed to see him recover, but died soon after returning home. After a period of convalescence, Renoir returned to the war, first as an observer taking photographs from slow-moving reconnaissance planes, then as a pilot, until a bad landing aggravated his leg wound and put him out of action for the duration.[1] The war also left its mark on his brother, Pierre, leaving him with a badly damaged arm. Renoir would call upon this wartime experience to underline the authenticity of what is seen in *La Grande Illusion*. He liked to point out that it is his flying jacket that Gabin is seen wearing in the film.[2] If his experience in reconnaissance can be seen as an unconventional introduction to photography, his injuries and the enforced rest they ensured gave him the chance to indulge a passion for watching films, especially the American ones that, with much French production out of action, now dominated cinema screens. Within a few years he would be making his own films.

The silent period was a distinctly uneven part of Renoir's career. It saw him direct films ranging from the visually experimental but melodramatic *La Fille de l'eau* (1924), through the avant-gardist *Charleston* (1926) and the colonialist commission *Le Bled* (1930), to the barrack-room comedy, *Tire-au-flanc* (1928).[3] Even a dedicated auteurist critic *should* struggle to find a consistent outlook across these films. Their only really consistent feature is a concern with formal and technical experiment.

Sound was to transform French cinema in general and Renoir's work in particular. Because sound technology made films much more expensive to make and show, it pushed the French industry towards more commercial work and discouraged the kind of experimentation that had marked some of the filmic output of the 1920s including Renoir's films. Driven to look

for ready-made scripts to fill the need for dialogue, Renoir turned, along with much of French cinema, towards theatrical adaptation, making three successful boulevard comedies into films: *On purge bébé* (1931); *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932); *Chotard et Cie* (1933). These works were interspersed with three adaptations of novels: *La Chienne* (1931), *La Nuit du Carrefour* (1932) and *Madame Bovary* (1933). Because most of these early sound films are gently or sharply critical of the pretensions and self-repression of the bourgeoisie, it becomes a little easier to make a case for thematic consistency across Renoir's output. However, because all drew on literary genres (the boulevard comedy, the realist novel) that routinely satirized or dissected the bourgeoisie, one should hesitate to attribute any consistency to a consistent directorial project. What they do show however is how quickly Renoir came to terms with the demands of sound and began to develop the formal repertoire that would come to full maturity in his films of the later 1930s, notably in *La Grande Illusion*.

On purge bébé, Renoir's first sound film, is the closest he ever came to filmed theatre. Remarkably tame when set against the visual experimentation of the silent years, it is shot in a transparently theatrical décor with no opening onto the outer world. The only technical aspect of it that Renoir tended to recall in later years was the use of the sound of a real toilet flushing, early evidence of his preference for acoustic realism. From only a year later, *Boudu sauvé des eaux* is a remarkably different piece of work. Although its interiors are shot in constructed decors (as they would consistently be in Renoir's 1930s films), there is already great use made of the kind of composition in depth that would be such an essential feature of his mature pre-war work. The film's preference for location shooting of exteriors is shared by Renoir's adaptations of novels in the early 1930s. Made a year after *Boudu*, the likeable but unremarkable *Chotard et Cie* confirms the existence of an emergent style. It is repeatedly characterised by a freely panning and tracking camera and in-depth staging that links its different spaces.

Toni (1934) signalled a shift in Renoir's career. Shot on location in the South of France, it moved him sharply towards contemporary issues and working class themes. Locating itself amongst a range of largely Mediterranean migrants, quarry workers, charcoal burners and peasants, it set itself firmly on the side of its Italian immigrant hero. It thus refused any narrow or closed definition of Frenchness and national belonging even

if it did not entirely escape stereotypes of hot-blooded latins.[4] At a time of virulent xenophobia in France, it suggested a deliberate taking of position that, alongside its admirable image of worker solidarity, suggested emergent political commitment.

Renoir's political involvement was confirmed by his cinematic and extra-cinematic activities during the period of the Popular Front when he became France's leading left-wing film-maker. He confirmed his radicalisation with *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935), a film made with the heavy involvement of the radical theatre troupe, *Le Groupe Octobre*, and with leftist anarchist poet and legendary script-writer Jacques Prévert. It tells the story of a print-workers' co-operative that arises after the forced departure of a capitalist boss. The fact that the co-operative reaches out to embrace all those who live around the courtyard where it is based is one factor that has meant that it has often been seen as typical of the values of a Popular Front that sought to build a broad and inclusive anti-fascist alliance. Yet, at the same time, the hero's murder of the capitalist and the film's sideswipes at the clergy and the military demonstrate a radicalism often attributed to the influence of the *Groupe Octobre* and Prévert rather than the director. Whatever the case may have been, Renoir's next project confirmed his political commitment beyond any doubt as he was to supervise the collective production of *La Vie est à nous*, a propaganda film made for the French Communist Party in the run up to the 1936 elections that would bring the Popular Front of which they were a part to power. While *La Vie*'s stylistic diversity and eclectic mix of documentary, newsreel and fictionalised episodes underscore the collective nature of its production, some parts clearly bear Renoir's hallmark features of the period, notably composition in depth, long takes, connection of different spaces and a highly mobile camera. These same features had of course been displayed to full advantage and taken to virtuoso lengths in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* whose courtyard set, as André Bazin, the great French film theorist, notes, invited the kind of tracking and panning movements that are so typical of Renoir's work at that time.[5]

Bazin suggests more generally that what distinguishes the mise-en-scène of the pre-war Renoir is the way in which his films constantly activate off-screen space. Renoir recognises that the frame is not so much a window on the world as a mask, so that what we cannot see is as important as what we can. While we only view what the camera permits, we are also constantly

made aware that what we cannot see nonetheless continues to exist. Rather than giving us the impression that the action has been staged for the frame and has no existence beyond it, the action in a Renoir film seems to pass through the frame and to exist before and after it. The primary way that this is achieved is through the mobility of the tracking and panning camera and through long takes, stylistic choices that together mean that constant reframing tends to substitute itself for cuts, so preserving the integrity and continuity of the filmed 'world'. The natural extension of the lateral mobility of the camera is the depth of composition of the typical Renoir shot, a feature which ensures that actors are solidly located in the spatial context of their actions rather than being isolated on a single plane and detached from their surroundings.[6]

While Bazin encapsulates Renoir's mature 1930s style with typical brilliance, there is a danger that he may push us to see it in terms of a purely ontological realism, one that resists the fragmentation of the filmed world by editing and underscores the fundamental interconnectedness of the real. Christopher Faulkner's work has provided a vital supplement to such a view by showing how Renoir's realism is a social one that works to bring class relations to the fore. When Renoir's camera connects different spaces through composition in depth or tracking and panning, it locates actions in their social context and connects different social groups, highlighting their interaction and probing the nature of their inter-relation.[7] Renoir's style of the middle and later 1930s did not spring up from nowhere in response to his political commitment. As I have shown, elements of it can be traced back to the beginning of the sound period or earlier. But what happened, about the time of the Popular Front, is that Renoir's increasingly assured style and the content of his films aligned in a tremendously productive way. Even as the films took on a new awareness of the contemporary context and of the social struggles associated with it, the style found, one might say, its reason to exist.

Renoir's involvement in *La Vie est à nous* underlined how he had become a Communist fellow traveller; that is, someone who was close to the party without being a member. This proximity was underscored by the cinema column that he began writing for the Communist evening paper, *Ce soir*, edited at the time by the great ex-Surrealist poet Louis Aragon.[8] It was also emphasised by the leading role he took in Ciné-Liberté, an

association that was a bold but short-lived Popular Front driven attempt to move towards a radically different cinema industry organised along co-operative lines and outside of the capitalist economy.[9] Initially secretary of the association, Renoir became the chair of its governing body and was the natural choice to direct its flagship project, *La Marseillaise,* a film which was to be funded by public subscription, underscoring the desired break with commercial production and the values associated with it. Originally intended to celebrate the Popular Front's shared purpose, the film unwittingly underlined its coming apart because, as it neared completion, only the Communists and the Communist inspired union federation, the CGT, remained on board, with the latter providing the extras for the crowd scenes.[10] Public subscription failed to provide sufficient funds for the film and it had to retreat to more conventionally commercial means.

Merely to see *La Marseillaise* as the expression of a defeat would be to overlook its radical intent. Telling the story of how representatives of Marseilles brought the French revolutionary anthem north to the capital and onwards to the great French victory at Valmy, Renoir's film was part of a broader attempt by the Popular Front to reclaim the symbols and the history of nation from the nationalist right in the run up to the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Revolution of 1789. The film invited the French public to make sense of their contemporary experience by drawing on the revolutionary tradition, with its preference for the radical egalitarian Revolution of 1792 over the moderate one of 1789 being a restatement of revolutionary vigour at a time when the Popular Front was flagging. It was being prepared even as *La Grande Illusion* was being shot. If it would be a mistake simply to see the two films as dimensions of the same project, not least because of *La Grande Illusion*'s more conventional production context, there are good reasons for thinking about the two together. While the events they deal with – the Revolution and the Great War – are more than a century apart, both seek to connect past and present struggles while mobilising French Republican traditions. More specifically, of course, both give an important place to the 'Marseillaise,' an anthem clearly central to the eponymous film but which also occurs, as we shall see, at a key turning point of *La Grande Illusion*. The two films can be joined to *La Règle du jeu* (1939) to form a revolutionary triptych, as long as one remembers, of course, that in the latter film the revolutionary tradition is a structuring absence,

something whose disappearance means that all hope of progressive change has disappeared from a society no longer able to renew itself and torn between destructive repetition and fascistic regression.[11] It is no accident that the film's chief location is a *château*, that symbol of pre-revolutionary France. *La Règle du jeu* confirms the burying of the political optimism that came into Renoir's film-making with the emergence of the Popular Front and shows a France heading blindly towards war while its inhabitants pursue their own frivolous and selfish concerns.

Taken together, *La Grande Illusion, La Marseillaise* and *La Règle du jeu* remind us that the Popular Front did not merely open Renoir's works to the contemporary world and the struggles that structured it, it also opened them up to history, to a sense that the world could change for better or for worse. It is therefore vital to analyse how the possibility of change is embedded within their narrative, characterisation, décor and mise-en-scène. Renoir's films of the period are not simply shot, as has often been remarked, in 'deep space' (with the full depth of the image being mobilised to bring social groups and contrasting spaces into contact), they are also shot in 'deep time' as the struggles between different socio-historical possibilities are played out across their story space. The same awareness of potential change also runs through another film from the same period, *Les Bas-fonds* (1937). If it begins by showing a world apparently characterised by fixed social roles and predictable destinies, it has shown by its conclusion that locations, costumes and even the shape of narratives in which characters find themselves are mutable.[12]

Les Bas-fonds was one of three films that Renoir made with Jean Gabin during the Popular Front period, alongside *La Grande Illusion* and the noir classic *La Bête humaine* (1938). Gabin was then emerging as *the* major French star of the era. The fact that Renoir was repeatedly able to work with him underlines both his high reputation as a director and his desire to make films that reached out for a large, popular audience. If popular cinema tends to avoid overt political comment because it inevitably runs the risk of alienating elements of the large audience that it seeks to assemble, the Popular Front period briefly opened up the possibility of a popular, political cinema. Renoir's films showed that there are different ways to be popular *and* political. One way, something aspired to by Ciné-Liberté, was to involve the common people or the workers as active partners

in film production. Another was to consistently make the 'ordinary' people the central protagonists of the drama, rather than the bourgeoisie as in the films of the earlier 1930s. A third was to address a popular audience by figuring its concerns and by speaking to it in the idiom of popular cinema. Thus, for example, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* used popular genres (the crime drama, the love story, the western), popular song and working class characters as a way of bringing a political story to a popular audience. But at the same time, each element needed to be worked upon to open it up to a progressive politics. Although the film was not a great box office success, it indicated the direction *La Grande Illusion* would need to take to bring its progressive vision to a wide public.

Cast and creative personnel

In the United States, the 1930s were the heyday of the Hollywood studio system with major studios dominating production, distribution and exhibition and with actors and technicians tied down by permanent studio contracts. It looked as if France might move in some similar directions in the early 1930s, with Pathé and Gaumont as the two major studios. However, their own mismanagement and the broader economic slump prevented such a development. The French system remained fragmented and under-financed and productions were typically put together as individual packages with cast and creative personnel brought together for each project.[13] Clearly, this system had advantages and disadvantages. If it meant that finance had to be put together on a film by film basis, it also meant that French directors had much more freedom to assemble their cast and crew than their Hollywood equivalents. An examination of Renoir's 1930s filmography shows that his work was no exception to this more general pattern.

Almost without exception, Renoir's 1930s films have different producers, with the only exceptions being *On purge bébé* and *La Chienne* both made with Braunberger and Richebé at the start of the decade and *Une Partie de campagne* which Braunberger co-produced in 1936. In contrast, the creative personnel of Renoir's films show a considerable degree of stability. Joseph de Bretagne joined Renoir as sound engineer on *La Chienne* and worked on another six films during the decade. Joseph Kosma composed music for